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THE LETTERS OF GEORGE MEREDITH

BY DARRELL FIGGIS

GREAT letter-writers are not habitually great writers apart from their letters, unless it happen that their other writing be largely couched in an epistolary or personal form, as with Lamb or Cowper. The reason is not very far to seek. The great writer, in the degree of his creation, is building an Art that shall be removed from the interposition of Time. It may grow and thrive, well or ill; it may even seem to turn from its first bent, as it is bound to derive its sustenance from the outer world of circumstance and occasion; but its growth and thrift is that of a structure complete in itself, in the end, in the measure of its success, to turn about and defy the challenge of Time. But the born letter-writer is one whose gaze is turned quite in the opposite direction. He watches the diurnal flow, takes keen delight in the ebb and flood, is absorbed in its apparent changes, and the petty toll borne past on the face of its waters. It is his very lack of preoccupation that gives the true letter-writer his charm.

Yet among those who are creators, not letter-writers, there is a considerable degree of difference in their correspondence. Keats, under the exacting discipline of his verse, had to deliver in his letters his conception of his art, even as, later, Flaubert was to elaborate in his *Correspondence* the principles that eliminated their own declaration in his novels. But with Meredith the case was different. His art was more hospitable to strangers. "All I have to say goes into books," he says, in a letter to Mrs. Janet Ross. At the time he wrote that he was at work upon *Emilia in England* (since altered to *Sandra Belloni*); and one need not read far into that book to discover why his letters should be so bare, in the main, of those comments on life and art

that provide so acute an interest in the correspondence of some artists.

Yet this shutting aside of other interests gives the sequence of Meredith's letters an extraordinary value when set beside the course of the novels. In its bare, almost nude, occupation with the strict business called up by the wayward necessity of correspondence a commentary is provided that is the more valuable because it has to be discovered. It is rather the exception than the rule to find any mention of the novel he is at work upon; indeed, save in the early days, there is no explicit reference to the work he has laid aside for the writing of his correspondence. It is even necessary to have dates in memory in order to discover the precise moment in what one might justifiably call his more permanent life. Yet when this has been done, when one has been laid beside the other end to end, a rich and extraordinary human interest emerges from the juxtaposition. As has been said, the very fact that the commentary thus provided should be so unpremeditated, in the natural course of things, makes it the happier when it is seen.

In the larger course of his life and his life's work it is so not less than in the closer application. For example, it is obvious to every reader of the novels that up to the time of the writing of *Harry Richmond* and *Beauchamp's Career* Meredith had in mind the larger audience of intelligent readers, however slight may have been his fortune in capturing their hearing. In the three novels that followed—*The Egoist*, *Diana of the Crossways*, and *One of Our Conquerors*—it is as clear that he addressed himself particularly to the smaller circle whose hearing he had won and on which he could to a measure rely; even as, in the closing two novels, it is possible to see a wider audience again introduced to the scope of the appeal and a gentler, less exacting, less eagerly brilliant spirit pervade their inception and execution.

Readers unfamiliar with the novels might have learned so much from the letters. Here it is even tragic. To read them steadfastly through is to fear at times for the writer, then to grieve for him; grieve the more keenly since his talking of the blow, though touched with bitterness, is so stoical—even to a righteous sense of indignation against all the tribe of short-sighted reviewers, secure in their little uncreative fastnesses. As novel succeeds to novel, in

the slight hints he makes concerning their presentation, it is even painful, in view of the event, to see his eager, ardent soul throwing itself into the prospect of at last laying by the heels the elusive Puck of popularity.

The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, his first novel, had been banned by the libraries as an immoral book; which, in the days of the three-decker, was death to any novel. Writing to the Rev. Augustus Jessopp, who speaks of bringing his wife to visit Meredith at Copsham, he asks: "Does she know that my literary reputation is tabooed as worse than libertine in certain virtuous societies, that there have been meetings to banish me from book clubs?" *Emilia in England* followed in due course on the stocks; and went all awry in the workmanship. He himself plainly recognizes this: and indeed it must be apparent to any reader. It appears in a letter to Sir William Hardman that this was due to "altering my original conception of the scheme"; and he declares in consequence to Mrs. Jessopp: "Of Emilia I cannot speak. She grieves me. I have never so cut about a created thing. There's good work in her; but the work? That note of interrogation is in person."

What chanced with *Evan Harrington* it is not possible to say. It was published at his own charges; and though the publisher later declared that it won him "a fairly large sum of money," the letters at this moment give no hint that any success has come his way. Yet his eye looks eagerly forward. He declares again to the Rev. Augustus Jessopp: "I shall be a *millionaire* next year. My plain story (*Rhoda Fleming*) is first to right me, and then the three-volumer (*Vittoria*) will play trumpets." The "plain story," strangely enough, never seems to have won his esteem to the end. It is not less curious to discover that it should have failed to win esteem with the reading public. *Vittoria* appeared first serially in the pages of the *Fortnightly Review*; but in the book form it was as unproductive of the larger fame he coveted as its hapless predecessors.

Yet, still he looks to the future to save the past. It is true he writes to John Morley: "As for *Harry Richmond*, I fear I am evolving his personality too closely for the public; but a man must work by the light of his conscience if he's to do anything worth reading." Nevertheless, he is full of hope. His words are plainly a safeguard against

excess of hope, for on hearing that William Hardman likes the tale as it appears serially and anonymously in the *Cornhill*, he declares: "So you do both care for *Richmond*. I hoped it. . . . I shall have another to follow when *Richmond* ceases, and so by drumming may make the public hear me at last." This other is *Beauchamp's Career*, wherein he tells Captain Maxse: "You may look and see. My dear Fred and his loving friend George Meredith."

These again went the way of the others. Nothing, it seemed, could win him the approbation he craved. The goal he sought seemed as remote as ever. For seventeen years since the publication of *Richard Feverel* (twenty-five years since the first volume of poems) he had drummed at the public ear, while the public had given but scant heed; and a change comes over the letters, slowly, like a film of cloud stealthily shutting out the brightness of the day.

Nothing, it would seem, could daunt the clean courage of Meredith or turn the stoic temper of his mind. Always he faced forward fearlessly, bravely. But courage in the affairs of men is not always one with a high and eager spirit. With Meredith it was not so after this repeated balking of his hopes. Constant work and continued disappointment have their way so terribly with him that it is even hard to read his letters at this time by reason of the utter weariness that they speak. Later, in the year of his death, we find him writing, "These reviewers do not reflect on their chances of wounding"; and there is the tang of retrospect in his phrase. But now he writes to his son Arthur on the Continent:

"Whether I can come to you hangs doubtful. I am half bound to work for the *Cornhill*; and as I am unpopular I am ill paid, and therefore bound to work double tides, hardly ever able to lay down the pen. This affects my weakened stomach, and so the round of the vicious circle is looped. I will come—be sure, if I find it prudently possible. . . . Yet I could not enjoy it under pressure of work to finish or a holiday stolen; I have lost my old buoyancy."

Later he writes to Admiral (sometime Captain) Maxse, saying: "For me I would not have my life again—under the conditions." "Consciousness," he adds, "excites human felicity to kill it. Past consciousness there may be a felicity eternal. These are not words; they are my excruciated thoughts—out of bloody sweat of mind, and now peaceful, imaging life, accepting whatever is there."

It is not easy to conceive of a possible eternal felicity apart from consciousness; but one can well imagine how so paradoxical a conception had captured the mind of a man whose very excess of consciousness in the past had been the instrument of his excruciation. It is during these years he turns about and writes entirely to please himself: no more seeking to woo the world, he erects his own peculiar world of Art, full of aerial delicate laughter, dialogues that dart through the air like swiftly jeweled arrows and wanderings in labyrinths of difficult and unexplored psychology. His house of Art is to be his own pleasure, wherein the intellectual athlete shall disport himself, seeing the mass of readers will not share its hospitality. And now it is that Fortune casts her capricious transformation over the history. Out of this final defiance of his emerges that larger recognition of his work that he had coveted so long, that had been so persistently withheld from him. So much so, indeed, that, as it wears on apace, he is induced to take up and conclude a novel that had lain aside for some years. *The Amazing Marriage*, as a letter to Robert Louis Stevenson makes clear, was begun immediately after *The Egoist*, but was not continued. It is not difficult to see what caused the continuance. He never, indeed, forgets his treatment at the hands of reviewers; he never, in his later years, sent out his volumes of poetry for review, leaving the querulous tribe to make merry, if they would, with his novels only; the very characteristics of Carinthia Jane in *The Amazing Marriage* stands for his conviction that there is a country where the sword of the irrevocable forbids the entry of forgiveness. Nevertheless, a change occurs. His letters soften and become more gracious; his sometime exultancy and buoyancy, it is true, are gone, but more than the reflection of them may be seen in the gentler and more chastened stoicism that takes its place; and the rigidity of his antagonism is relaxed, a more tender outlook supervening.

Two friendships, in his letters, stand for signs of these two moods in him: the early mood of exuberance and hope, and the later mood of philosophic resolution. William Hardman he met when they were both living at Esher; and in Blackburn Tuckham of *Beauchamp's Career* he recorded his portrait of him. "Mr. Tuckham had a round head, square, flat forehead, and ruddy face; he stood as if his feet

claimed the earth under them for his own, with a certain stoutness of leg that detracted from the majesty of his resemblance to our eighth Harry, but increased his air of solidity; and he was authoritative in speaking." Sir William Hardman has already recorded his early reminiscences of Meredith; and the irresistible gaiety of these letters to "Tuck" (as he dubbed him, receiving the sobriquet of "Robin" in return) confirms and even revivifies that enlivening picture. Snatches of song are trolled out with whatever caprice of the moment; laughter bubbles up through the words; the irresponsible gaiety that characterized their walks through Surrey and Hampshire, swinging madrigals along the lanes and chaffing each other continually, breaks out into every line of these early letters. "Do we quarrel?" he asks in one of them. "If so, I send love to somebody and snap my fingers at you. If not, my regards of the warmest to both."

To see so spontaneous a mood passing from the letters, to see the exuberance and high-spirited gaiety crushed into a more ordered steadfastness, is to have strangely recalled to one his own stern and stoic phrase with regard to the change that was wrought in his Emilia: "It is a quality going and a quality coming." One of the most curious things in Meredith's life was the way in which it was required of him that he should stand the challenge of his own philosophy as outlined in such early works as *The Shaving of Shagpat* and *Sandra Belloni*. The new series of letters that now begin to John Morley mark the passing of spontaneity and the coming of an enriched philosophy that has some strange correspondences with the spiritual evolution of Emilia, lacking though it be in the central fitness.

The friendship was a rare one: intimate, yet never quite familiar, based on identity of issue and mutual admiration rather than on the more spontaneous promptings of the blood, with the result that the letters rely not only on the warmer interchange for the matter mentioned in them, the roll of the world's affairs being touched upon incidentally with a vivid and incisive pen. They yet display a rich strength of affection that is infinitely touching in its tale of a manly interchange of love.

It is to John Morley he delivers his opinion of Tennyson's "Arthurian Cycles":

"He is a real singer; and he sings this mild fluency to this great length.

Malory's *Morte Arthure* is preferable. Fancy one affecting the great poet and giving himself up" (in our days!—he must have lost the key of them) "to such dandiacal fluting. . . . I read the successive lines with pain—yards of linen—drapery for the delight of ladies who would be in the fashion. . . . The praises of the book shut me away from my fellows."

It is to John Morley he says of Mark Pattison: "Pattison on 'Books' is perfectly correct. As with India, irrigation would improve his produce." He tells him: "I have read your *Robespierre*. It sent me to Carlyle. He bears rereading. Still, that kind of thing will not do. It is our only history of the French Revolution, and is in as much disorder as the Paris of Danton." And, indeed, the letters to him are full of such incidental and incisive touches that make us crave for the other half of them. For this friendship, coming at full maturity, flowed to the end. It was John Morley, as editor of the *Fortnightly Review*, who printed the serial issue of many of Meredith's novels, such as *Vittoria*, *Beauchamp's Career*, and *The Tragic Comedians*, whereas *Diana of the Crossways* and *One of Our Conquerors* were subsequently first published in that *Review* as a consequence of that partnership. It was to the credit of his discernment and courage that he did so. At the end of his days we find Meredith writing to him, when Mr. Arthur Balfour had proposed him for the Order of Merit:

"When the communication came I had vision of an enormous misty mountain that had been in some odd way benevolent to me, and I was mystified until I detected the presence of an active mouse, assuring me of a living agency in the strange matter—anything but a ridiculous birth. For evidently it had fretted at the ear of the Premier and caused A. B. to cast eye on a small a. b., long a workman in letters. Was I not right? I wished for no distinction. A title would have sunk me. But I could not be churlish in this case. Besides, I am to be ranked with and near you."

Yet among all the letters—letters to friends and letters to strangers, letters of early buoyancy, letters of later bitterness, and letters that breathe a rich harvest at the evening of the day, letters that are redolent of his fragrant intimacy with the varying face of Mother Earth, and letters that deal with household affairs—the only name that continues from the very earliest almost to the close is that of Admiral Maxse. It is in its way a wonderful correspondence. We have now, in a letter already quoted, Meredith's own explicit authority for finding "my dear Fred and his loving friend George Meredith" in *Beauchamp's Career*—Nevil

Beauchamp being, as is well known, Captain Maxse, and Dr. Shrapnel (who is therefore framed in caricature) his own creator. To recall the letters written by Dr. Shrapnel to Nevil Beauchamp is to discover more energetic paraphrases of some of the letters in this collection. It is, for example, Dr. Shrapnel who writes to Nevil Beauchamp:

"Take this, my Beauchamp, for the good in prayer, that it makes us repose on the unknown with confidence, makes us flexible to change, makes us ready for revolution—for life, then! He who has the fountain of prayer in him will not complain of hazards. Prayer is the recognition of laws, the soul's exercise and source of strength, its thread of conjunction with them. Prayer for an object is the cajolery of an idol, the source of superstition."

It is George Meredith who writes to Captain Maxse, speaking of prayer:

"It is good for men. It is at once an acknowledgment of some higher power; it rouses up and cleanses the nature, and searches us through to find what we are. Only the praying for gifts and thanking for gifts is really damnable. It's treating the Lord as an old uncle."

The identity, in fact, is even closer than a superficial similarity of words would suggest. Dr. Shrapnel, one remembers, was a kind of spiritual, social, and physical mentor to Beauchamp; and in his letters Meredith is repeatedly taking this office for Captain Maxse. "Don't forget," he says to him, "that mental arrogance is as a fiery wine to the spirit—a little of it gives a proper pride; but you carry too much." Frequently he rebukes him; often he encourages him. His political predilections are taken to task; and even the problems of hygiene and of desirable and undesirable foodstuffs are examined in detail. One of the results of this is that as Meredith grows through the somewhat severe discipline that life had set for him it is possible to discover the growth, the evolution rather than the change, in his opinions. Even as the great buoyancy passes into a stoic discipline and resolution, so the earlier zest for all of life passes into a discrimination of its uneven values. The large praiser of wine—port in *Evan Harrington* and *The Egoist*, sherry in *Rhoda Fleming*, claret in *Harry Richmond*, champagne in *One of Our Conquerors*, the vintage of the Rhine Valley in *The Tragic Comedians*—comes to say: "I do not abjure wine when it is old and of good vintage. I take it rarely. . . . Stimulants may refresh and may even temporarily comfort the body after labor of brain; they

do not help it—not even in the lighter kinds of labor. They unseat the judgment, pervert vision.” This, to be true, was to a correspondent other than Captain Maxse, yet in the letters to him, in the discipline of diet that he outlines for him, may be seen the stem and bough of which this is the leaf.

The study of Meredith’s philosophy and its growth is its own separate study; yet in these letters to Captain Maxse the change in the man is seen that created the philosophic growth, since a man’s philosophy is ever his attempt satisfactorily to account for his presence in the world. Philosophies are always, in their degree, mechanical; yet here it is possible to lay the finger on “the human pulse of the machine.” Indeed, it becomes possible the better to interpret the machine, for there are certain reservations, hints even, and intimations in the stoic creed he wrought for himself, unnecessarily neglected when they lie scattered through his work. If the neglect he suffered caused him to spin a somewhat stern garment for himself where he went his unacknowledged way, and so to shut himself from the gentler solace that enlightens the minds of men, he was yet not so immune from their quick hopes as it might appear. In the agnostic age in which he lived it was not so easy for him to give their just value to these intimations that haunted his mind acutely at some moments, and from which he was never quite free even when he denied himself the solace they proffered. Yet there they were; and it is characteristic of his later correspondence that, while it is always present as an animating spirit in his letters to Captain Maxse, it only takes explicit form in the letters to John Morley. It is to John Morley, for example, that he writes the following wonderful letter:

“I tossed off a letter to St. B. to end the year ’77. I greet you in the first hour of the New One, after a look at the stars from my chalet door, and listening to the bells. We have just marked one of our full stops, at which Time, turning back as he goes, looks with his old-gentleman smile. To come from a gaze at the stars—Orion and shaking Sirius below him—is to catch a glance at the inscrutable face of him that hurries us on, as on a wheel from dust to dust. I thought of you and how it might be with you this year: hoped for good: saw beyond good and evil to great stillness, another form of moving for you and me. It seems to me that Spirit is—how, where, and by what means involving us, none can say. But in this life there is no life save in spirit. The rest of life, and we may know it in love, is an aching and a rotting.”

Possibly it was this very night's reflection that prompted the poem "Meditation under Stars"; where, one remembers, night having passed, he comes to earth with his mind full of the hints of eternal majesty the stars convey, and

"Then at new flood of customary morn,
Look at her through her showers,
Her mists, her streaming gold,
A wonder edges the familiar face:
She wears no more that robe of printed hours;
Half strange seems Earth, and sweeter than her flowers."

"Sweeter than her flowers"! Yet this was he who once sang:

"Into the breast that gives the rose,
Shall I with shuddering fall?"

It is even so in that great hour of trial when he knew that his richly happy second marriage was to know the term sternly set by death. Even here it is true that "all he has to say goes into books." When the blow fell on him he found his solace in erecting that stately though chastening temple of fortitude and stoic comfort, "A Faith on Trial." Here he turns to Earth for comfort and learns that

"Harsh wisdom gives Earth, no more;
In one the spur and the curb:
An answer to thoughts and deeds;
To the Legends an alien look;
To the Questions a figure of clay."

"Smite, Sacred Reality!" he cries; and will take no solace from hopes for, instincts of, a richer being beyond the clay. Indeed, he declares roundly to Mr. Herbert Trench that "the good ship Immortality methinks has served her turn." Nevertheless, in the last days of his wife's illness, he writes to John Morley: "Happily for me, I have learnt to live much in the spirit and see brightness on the other side of life, otherwise this running of my poor doe with the inextricable arrow in her flanks would pull me down too." To his son, after her death, he says: "I do not doubt that you think of your dear mother. Think of her as alive in the spirit. She is with you in your worthiest thoughts—and the nobler they are the more you may be sure of that." And so again to John Morley: "Death is death, as you say, but I get to her by consulting her thoughts and wishes—and so she lives in me. This, if one has the strength of soul, brings a spirit to us."

In a letter to G. P. Baker (now Professor of English in Harvard University) he declared: "When . . . you say that a certain change in public taste, should it come about, will be to some extent due to me you hand me the flowering wreath I covet." The novel, he adds, he wished to use to this end, though he wisely adds that he "never started on a novel to pursue the theory it developed." It is the irony of events that the neglect dealt out to his earlier novels should largely have induced the stern, somewhat severe, indisputably stoic spirit that actuates his later work in verse and prose. It is a spirit that, when not almost repellent, as in *Carinthia Jane*, seems rather to be exclusive than inclusive, ascetic rather than generous, as in *Matthew Weyburn*. Such was the cloak wherewith he clothed himself rather than the urgent, desiring man within the cloak, as these letters reveal him to be. Therefore they come to cast a rich and flowing light over his works, helping us to interpret them as with a fuller significance, and even at times as being lit with a possible mystical beauty. By their aid our ears may be attuned to the discovery of a chord that shall be heard sounding with a sudden spiritual meaning in a music that seems to be prohibitive of the larger spiritual application.

It is tragic to think how much of this might have been unnecessary, how much these quicker inspirations might have found their place in his more deliberate philosophy, had it not been for the stoicism with which he guarded himself against the neglect of a bull-minded public. In a letter to Swinburne he writes: "I see the illustrious Hutton" (whose day of petty authority is now happily wrapped from memory) "of the *Spectator* laughs insanely at my futile efforts to produce an impression on his public." Later in the same letter there is a phrase poignant in its tragedy. "I am being carried away from the Singing," he cries. All through them, to one correspondent or another, this insistence of the value of the Singing to him is enforced, accompanied though it usually is with a recognition of its futility in his material state of affairs. Early in his life he writes to Mrs. Janet Ross: "I have left *Emilia Belloni* untouched for months. . . . *En revanche*, I am busy on poems"; and later to her again, "I regret to say I can't give up writing poetry, which keeps your poet poor." Nor is he in any sense doubtful of the particular quality of some of his

poems. "They are flints, perhaps, and not flowers," he tells the Rev. Augustus Jessopp. Their tendency was ever that way; which is to say that his tendency was ever that way, since a man's poetry is ever the reflex of his soul. But the rich waves might have come on them had their execution not always been in the interstices of a heavy pressure of work. And in such a case the Singing would have reflected his deeper aspirations instead of setting bounds to them by a praise of brain rule.

That is to say that in the letters, despite the fact that they are chiefly incidental by nature, one may approach nearer the breathing heart of Meredith than even in his work.

We see him as a philosopher-artist, a little fearful of what is called the artistic temperament; a man as much in touch with the world as the earth. It is possible to catch him in the undress of his hopes and thoughts; and to see their more various tendencies before he has eliminated such part of them as could not find entry into the straighter channel of his philosophy. Yet, above all, we are taken into some of the intimacies of a mind so rich, so full that one wonders where there is another mind so rich, outside Shakespeare, in English literature.

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